

# Local artist leaves mark on books, history of Dorchester

by Anthony Mitchell Sammarco

Bookplates might be thought of as a luxury few of us can afford, but a century ago a book without the owner's name and plate might never be returned. Though most bookplates would simply state that it was "Ex Libris" from someone's library, one Dorchester resident took them to new heights.

Elisha Brown Bird (1868-1943) was the son of John and Rebecca Richardson. Bird, whose house was on West Cottage Street, the present site of Boston Edison. Educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Bird would later be employed by the "Boston Herald" as a cartoonist to sketch baseball games while in progress. This new form of "reporting" allowed him to perfect his quick sketches, but his artistic skills were not being met. He was later to establish an office where he created bookplates for noted collectors.

Within a few years, Elisha Bird, "Book Plate Designer" as he called himself, was to publish a collection of bookplates in "photogravure" for prospective clients. Printed in 1916, this collection included the bookplates of the Bostonian Society, Wellesley College, the New Bedford Public Library and numerous private collections. So artistic and unique had his bookplates become that "when the American Antiquarian Society decided to make a collection of the best American bookplates in the 20's, they chose works from only four of the then living bookplate men: Messrs. Hofsen, MacDonald, Smith, and artist E.B. Bird from Dorchester, Massachusetts" according to an October 1972 article by Curtis Norris in "Yankee".

BY THE 1930'S BOOKPLATES WHICH ARE NOT a luxury but a necessity for the man who desires to beautify his library" became Bird's mission in life. In an article



Elisha Brown Bird (left); Personal bookplate of Bird (right).

from 1934, "it takes Mr. Bird about a week to turn out a bookplate design. He does most of his work with pen and pencil. The original is about eight by twelve inches, but this is reduced to four by two and three-eighths on the plate". It has been said that his entire life has been dedicated to creative art and that with his experience in the newspaper field included such well known newspapers as *The Boston Globe*, *The Herald*, *The Transcript* and the *New York World, Times* and *Evening Post*.

In later life, he was to design bookplates for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Knox College, Princeton University, Yale University and the College of William and Mary. His bookplates for personal libraries included Jessica Dragonette, "the Muse of Song", Charles H. Taylor, who founded "the Boston Globe", Frank Wood, for whom the Wood Nursing Home on Morton Street is named, and my own grandfather. In a press release, *The*

*Ex-Libris Journal* in London said that "Mr. Bird's drawing are unusually strong black and white...and always show careful thought in their...execution. They show the hand of a master artist in the excellence of drawing and figure work, and in the conception of color and tone".

Upon his death the obituary read "Elisha Brown Bird, internationally known illustrator and many years president of the American Society of Bookplate Designers and Collectors died this morning..."

His bookplates continue to identify not just the owners of the books they are pasted into, but a Dorchester artist who was among the finest in his field.

Anthony Mitchell Sammarco's award winning history columns are a regular feature of the *Dorchester Community News*.